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FM AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7161
INFO RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL PRIORITY 8642
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 3311
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI PRIORITY 9793
RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE PRIORITY 5533
RUEHPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR PRIORITY 4274
RHMFSS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISLAMABAD 001995

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/30/2018

TAGS: PGOV PK PREL

SUBJECT: RUMORS OF MUSHARRAF RESIGNATION, NATIONAL ASSEMBLY
DISSOLUTION

REF: ISLAMABAD 1955

Classified By: Ambassador Anne W. Patterson for reasons 1.5 (b), (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: As one press headline announced May 30, "Rumors and Denials Galore." Pakistan is abuzz at the possibility that President Pervez Musharraf may be ready to resign from office, or, alternatively, use his 58(2)(b) constitutional powers to dissolve the National Assembly. A particularly long May 28 meeting between Musharraf and Chief of Army Staff Ashfaq Kayani appears to have sparked the resignation rumors; these were immediately denied by the President. Speaking to the Ambassador May 30, NSA Tariq Aziz stated that Musharraf had no intention of resigning. He further disregarded the other rumor about the impending dissolution of the assembly; however, he also warned about political mis-steps by the new GOP and frustration over recent public statements made by Pakistan People's Party (PPP) leader Asif Zardari. End summary.

The Rumor

¶2. (C) As they did all May 29, Pakistani interlocutors continued today to ask EmbOffs for confirmation that President Pervez Musharraf was prepared to resign from office. No other details, for example, whether Musharraf would leave the country or receive any legal indemnity, accompanied most inquiries. The rumor-mongering was sparked by a front-page story in "The News" May 29. Citing an unusually long and late-night May 28 meeting between Musharraf and Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Ashfaq Kayani, the article concluded Musharraf had made up his mind to resign from the presidency.

¶3. (C) Media and Embassy contacts have also highlighted other concurrent events as evidence supporting the resignation rumor. Specifically, they point to the replacement of the commander of the 111th Brigade, which until now had been held by a close Musharraf confidant; this brigade has had historical links to Pakistan's military leaders. There appears to have also been a change in leadership of the unit charged with the President's security. Lastly, Senate Chairman Mohammedian Soomro, who constitutionally would become caretaker President if there were a resignation, was called back ahead of schedule from a foreign tour.

The Rebuttal

¶4. (SBU) Immediately responding, a military spokesman termed both the Musharraf-Kayani meeting and the changes of command

as "routine." The President's spokesman, and later Musharraf himself, also vehemently denied these resignation reports late into May 29.

¶ 15. (C) Speaking to the Ambassador May 30, NSA Tariq Aziz called the resignation rumors "bogus," blaming Urdu-daily "Jang" for trying to embarrass the President. He further charged the GEO/Jang Group of being on the payroll of Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) leader Nawaz Sharif. Aziz asked for a statement of USG support. "If Musharraf falls," Aziz argued, "it will be a black eye for the United States" since he is (wrongly) perceived to be in the U.S.'s pocket.

Other Rumors

¶ 16. (C) Prior to the resignation rumor, the political chatter openly worried of an impending dissolution of the National Assembly by the President. But in their May 30 conversation, Aziz told the Ambassador that many parts of the GOP's amendments package, including the President's power to dissolve assembly under Article 58(2)(b), were "negotiable." Aziz assured the Ambassador that "Musharraf would never dissolve parliament."

¶ 17. (C) Aziz, however, followed-up this promissory declaration with a long description of how Pakistan was "not ready for democracy." The U.S. had not believed, he said, that elections would be free and fair, that Musharraf would resign as COAS, or that Pakistan would be returned to a full democracy. Aziz then added, "I told you that the return of

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these democrats would not be desirable," warning that Pakistan People's Party (PPP) leader Asif Zardari and PML-N's Nawaz Sharif would "plunder the country." Musharraf, in contrast, had been honest, he argued.

Talking Through The Press, Instead Of Directly

¶ 18. (C) Zardari continued to be reluctant to meet with Musharraf, and Musharraf was now reluctant to meet with him, Aziz told the Ambassador. Aziz claimed to have told Zardari that his recent confrontational approach, i.e., publicly calling for Musharraf's departure, was the wrong approach. The President has a &commando personality," and he would be more likely to lash out if publicly threatened, Aziz supposedly warned Zardari.

¶ 19. (SBU) But a recent speech by Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani apparently has just fanned the flames. Speaking at Pakistan's National Defense University May 29, Gilani criticized the role of "some among the military" for the political crises throughout the country's history. Gilani's confidence in chastising the military, particularly in this setting, was widely noted. And then, on the heels of Zardari's "relic of the past" comment last week about Musharraf, PML-N's Sharif, more stridently than ever, called not only for Musharraf's ouster but for him to be "brought to justice."

¶ 110. (C) Comment: Rumors of Musharraf's resignation have been floated at regular intervals, and Musharraf himself has previously, publicly and privately, warned that he might resign if the country no longer needed his leadership. Also, the rumor about dissolution of the National Assembly, which has been pushed off the front pages, cannot be entirely dismissed if Musharraf feels his back is against the wall. Both Musharraf and his NSA Aziz, in recent meetings with the Ambassador and visiting Codels, have sharply criticized the new GOP's handling of Pakistan's economy and war on terror. However, this rumor/counter-rumor may just be (and probably is) typical Pakistani political gamesmanship, a prelude for tough negotiations on the 62-part amendments package (reftel). End comment.

PATTERSON